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ABSTRACT

Despite the current emphasis on thinking skills and the resulting concentration on lists and taxonomies that do not succeed beyond research contexts, all reflective people know that critical thought relies not on applying mental steps but on simply trying to figure out what might be right or wrong. This depends on one basic cognitive act, contrasting--directing one's initial thoughts to the crucial differences between things or to the distinctions that reveal essential characteristics. This thinking is necessary and natural in the study of literature because writers often use comparison and contrast in their writing, while readers must compare and contrast their understanding against the criterion of the text's assumed coherence. To help students enjoy literature's resonances (the relationships of such elements as images, characters, and circumstances), teachers must foster their critical perceptions and contrastive powers through recognizing and applying contrastive thought. Such critical thought can be taught by example, guided discussion, and independent writing, particularly through use of a divided reader's journal in which students paraphrase and quote contrastive parts of literature texts. (Appended are examples of a divided page and the comment page in the reader's journal.) (EL)

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Critical Thinking and the Experience of Literature

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Today the education community is paying special attention to "critical thought," a type of cognition defined and taught in various ways. Some scholars emphasize logic -- the deductive and inductive processes; some emphasize creative problem solving -- brainstorming, hypothesizing, testing; some rely on taxonomies of kinds of thinking -- comprehending, applying, analyzing, synthesizing. Whatever system they advocate, writers on critical thinking agree that the vocabulary of this topic requires such terms as premise, reason, conclusion, inference, assumption, relevant/irrelevant, consistant/contradictory, credible/doubtful, evidence, fact, opinion, problem. (Paul 1984, 6)

English teachers, however, will recognize in the recent contexts of these words a rehashing of substance that has been in our composition textbooks for decades. And while we may applaud the promise of help from across the curriculum, we may also find discomfort in the urgency with which agency after agency is compiling lists of "thinking skills" (CEEB, NIE, The New Jersey Task Force Taxonomy of Thinking Skills). When critical thinking becomes a sub-discipline spawning such facilities as the "Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique" at Sonoma State University, we might well fear attempts, however benign, to excuse the disciplines from primary responsibility for the study of critical thought.

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The most serious threat comes from those who would delineate patterns of discrete skills using jargon inflated to the highest possible abstraction. Consider, for example, the notion of "Intelligence as Thinking and Learning Skills" explained by psychologist Robert J. Sternberg (1981). Sternberg offers a list of nine skills required for "adaptive task performance," an ability he exemplifies with the task of writing a research paper. Among the skills are "process selection," "representation selection," "strategy selection," and "processing allocation." Sternberg concludes:

> Intelligence can usefully be viewed as a set of thinking and learning skills that, potentially, at least, can be separately diagnosed and taught. Information-processing psychologists are heavily involved in research that we hope will bring the diagnosis and teaching of these skills from the realm of hypothesis to the realm of practical reality. (20)

Fortunately there are other psychologists who would save us from such good intentions. ETS Distinguished Research Scientist Irving Siegel is quoted in Benderson (1984): "If I gave you a math problem and asked what you did to solve it so that you became aware of your thought processes, you'd find that they don't have the linearity presupposed by these taxonomies and the training programs based on them." Sadler and Whimbey (1985) summarize the issue with a useful analogy:

> We believe that teaching people to think is like

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> teaching someone to swing a golf club. It is most important to get the feel of the whole action. If you start by working on just one small piece of the swing, you'll surely make a mess of it. (200)

Of all the disciplines, certainly none has offered its members more experience in the frustration of "working on just one small piece of the swing" than has English. Only recently have English teachers in noticeable numbers begun to abandon the product-assembly model of composition instruction. But even with the powerful and enduring influence of the National Writing Project, we English teachers still find ourselves tempted to stratify our students and the skills we long to teach them.

Part of the appeal that the vivisection of student language and thought has for us is that through research it does make levels and stages apparent; and once levels are apparent, they may be fit into models that seem applicable in many ways, including the specification of instructional goals. For example, Allan Purves and his colleagues have developed and repeatedly demonstrated a set of categories of written response to literature (Purves and Rippere 1968, Purves (1981). While Purves has used the model only for descriptive research, others have used its categories experimantally as levels to be elicited in the classroom by specified techniques. Lucking (1976) had teachers ask questions organized according to one taxonomy (Bloom's) so as to elicit responses characterized by another (Purves').

Revealing as such scholarship can be, however, we find little if any evidence that it has helped English teachers more

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than have the moot lists of "thinking skills" coming from educational task forces. If we grant that critical thought and the language arts require extremely subtle, extremely complex processes and if we grant that we should do everything we can to help our students grow in their abilities to use language thoughtfully, then we must wonder why the subtle, complex lists and taxonomies do not succeed beyond the contexts of research. Psychologist Sternberg (1985) suggests that it is because critical thinking programs do not put students in life-like situations. Classroom experience, though, suggests that it is because, paradoxically, the taxonomies are too subtle and complex.

Teachers, students, indeed all reflective people know that such critical thought as they must undertake relies not on self consciously applying mental steps but on simply persisting to try to figure out what might be right or wrong: right or wrong with a guess, with a feeling, with a belief, with a solution. The fundamental critical act, we sense, must be simple yet must give us full access to the mind's subtlety and complexity. Such an act must rely on the simplest way to be complex. If we construe complexity as something more than one, then we can understand that the simplest complex thought requires a duality. Linguists, mathematicians, and computer scientists understand that the handiest way to communicate a feature of something, no matter how complex, is binomially. A binomial signal requires only one of two symbols to communicate a basic alternative. Either something is present (+), or it is not (-), as in "animate" or "inanimate." Either a switch is "on", or it

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is "off." Either the value of a given place in a sequence is "0", or it is "1." Trying to figure out what might be right or wrong, therefore, depends fundamentally not on systematic hypothesizing or taxonomic inquiry but on one basic cognitive act: contrasting. Astute critical thinkers direct their initial thoughts to the other side of things, to the crucial differences between things, to the distinctions that reveal essential characteristics. This is the kind of thinking we see Socrates doing in Plato's dialogues. It is the kind that generates the dialectic process whereby a thesis and an antithesis are examined to achieve a strong synthesis.

In teaching this basic contrastive process, we might be tempted to make a taxonomy of its applications, to try to identify "small pieces of the swing." For example, we might elaborate the distinctions between contrasts over time (before and after) and contrasts between qualities (differences in degree and kind). But this would be a mistake. What we need is not mechanical analysis of the process, but ever-deepening experience in discovering what seems right and wrong with ideas.

In no school subject is this thinking more necessary and natural than in the study of literature. We can see why this is so by tracing the critical stance common to both the writing and the reading of literature. When writers discuss their art (Bizzaro 1983), they often mention how creative writing is a matter of concentrating more and more clearly on what the essential substance of the work seems to be. Writers constantly look forward, comparing and contrasting what they write against the criterion of what the piece seems to need; and they look back

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into their lives for the most important material to synthesize in meeting this need. When a work is finished, its elements (images, characters, circumstances) exist in an aesthetic tension one with another. A good term for this relationship among the elements is "resonance." One way to characterize the difference between good and poor literature is that the former offers more and deeper resonances.

Readers also focus their consciousness increasingly according to the requirements of the work. They must constantly search their own experiences for knowledge and feelings appropriate to the words in context. They must compare and contrast their understanding against the criterion of the work's assumed coherence. There is no one "right" reading of a work, not even by the author. There are, however, readings that make relatively consistent sense and that produce relatively numerous and deep resonances.

To help our students enjoy literature's resonances, we must foster their critical perceptions, and as we have seen, this would most efficiently be done by developing their contrastive, dialectic powers. Contrastive thinking is nothing new to the English classroom. Teachers have always sensed that having students consider a single literary feature does not invite critical insight as readily as does having them consider a thesis with an antithesis or an image with a contrary image or a character with a differing character. What I propose is that we recognize the fundamental nature of contrastive thought and apply it more thoroughly than we have, especially if this application

would be at the expense of a list of "thinking skills."

Such critical thought can be taught by example, by guided discussion, and by students' independent writing. Benjamin Demott (1983) traces the thoughts of a teacher preparing to lead students in a consideration of Act I, Scene iii of Macbeth. He focuses on the difference between the way Macbeth and Banquo react upon seeing the witches. Macbeth is silent, still, absorbed in his own impressions whereas Banquo is voluable, mobile, open in his speculations. Demott uses this simple contrast to begin a train of thought that deeply penetrates these two characters. Banquo is the type of man who looks on the world as something to be comprehended in common terms. He systematically applies catagories: Are these creatures people? Do they possess or lack speech and sex? Macbeth, on the other hand, is shaken by the encounter, and the moment is inexpressible to him. His response to the strange and exceptional is not to try to get a grip on it but rather to confront it in a heightened, awed consciousness. The contrast between the two characters permits us to see each in relief and thus more clearly than would a consideration of one alone. But the contrast also resonates one of the play's major themes: the frightening gap between the normal world of common expectations and the exceptional world of intensely private pathological drives.

Sometimes a fruitful contrast can be invented: What happens to William Carlos Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" if it offers squirrels instead of chickens? A device familiar to all English teachers is to assign a comparison-contrast essay on two works. But such assignments will foster critical thought only if

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students use the comparison-contrast as a means rather than an end. They should strive to achieve a critical synthesis, and a deeper appreciation of each work's resonances by using contrast as a sort of wedge or lever to open up associations.

The most effective way I have found to encourage students in the use of their contrastive, dialectic faculties is the divided reader's journal. In this journal, illustrated in the appendix, students draw a line down the middle of a page on the left of the journal. Down one half of the page they paraphrase and quote selectively from a work of literature. Down the other half they paraphrase and quote contrastive parts from the same work or from another work. They write no thoughts of their own on this page; they simply select material that seems comparable in significant ways. Next, the students reflect on the elements in the two lists and revise them if they wish by adding, deleting, and maybe drawing arrows from some entries to others. Then on the right hand journal page they compose one or more paragraphs that explain the significances suggested by these reflections.

Obviously this is a kind of writing most high school and even college students will not master quickly. If the teacher can convincingly demonstrate the intellectual benefits of such thinking and if the work of the students is incorporated into the daily curriculum, then there is a chance for students and teacher to achieve the elusive goal of truly deepening their critical abilities instead of indulging the bleak delusion that progress up a taxonomy constitutes a good day's work.

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Example of Reader's Journal

Divided Page

from Common Sense
Thomas Paine

Paine believed society is good for mankind. It "unites our affections...encourages intercourse' and acts as our "patron." Government is an evil necessary for our protection because people can be "wicked." Government serves only to permit society to thrive, and when it becomes too active it hurts society with its prohibitions (laws). Government officials, therefore, should have to run regularly for election "so that the elected might never form to themselves an interest separate from the electors'." This is obvious because "however prejudice may wrap our wills, or interest darken our understanding, the simple voice of nature and reason will say, 'tis right."

from "Self Reliance"
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson believed that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." Society wants man to desert his individual sense of right and to conform to group conventions. So, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.

Government is just a natural extension of society's drive to make its members conform. But "no law can be sacred to me but that of my nature." Society is no agent of progress. "Society never advances." It just "acquires new arts and loses old instincts. Nature is not founded on reason but on individual integrity. "These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are...perfect in every moment of their existence."

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Example of Reader's Journal Comment Page

It is interesting that even in a time of great difficulty and danger, Paine could write confidently about making a better form of government and a more helpful society by resisting our personal prejudices and being governed by our reason. Reason was seen as the only means of attaining universal truth. Paine had confidence in a universe built according to universal principles that any objective person can see. It seems to me that to stick with it and win a bloody revolution requires a very strong confidence in man's ability to work together to improve things.

Emerson, on the other hand had little confidence in society or in reason. As an individualistic romantic, Emerson believed that depending on reason would keep a person from discovering truths that only intuition and feelings could reveal. Depending on society would also corrupt you because society only wants you to conform to its conventions and not follow your own inner voice. He believed that the fount of all wisdom lay inside the individual because only there could you see your natural self. Nature was purely good because it was purely, undeceptively itself, (unlike man in society), and since your own self is that part of nature most accessible to you the individual, then the more you depend on it, the better off you'll be.

It seems to me that Emerson's kind of self assurance can't do much for mankind, although he maintains that only nonconformists bring good into the world. Emerson's "self reliance" would in the long run cut man off from his fellow man, and, as Paine must have felt, if we don't believe we can make things in our society better, it's hard to see how we can have the chance to make ourselves better.

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